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DE RUEHRH #1303/01 2741613
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1634
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA IMMEDIATE 0230
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 0329
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN IMMEDIATE 0233

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001303

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/29/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ASAD'S VISIT: SAUDI-SYRIAN RAPPROCHEMENT BACK ON TRACK?

REF: A. BEIRUT 1079

[1](#)B. RIYADH 1154

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Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh,
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad's unexpected attendance at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) opening, and his lengthy meeting with King Abdullah on the margins, has encouraged speculation about further Saudi-Syrian rapprochement and its potential regional implications. Post contacts describe media reports of the meeting as largely accurate, noting that Lebanese government formation, Palestinian reconciliation, and Asad's invitation to King Abdullah to visit Damascus dominated the agenda. They confirm that Turkish mediation played a role in bringing about the visit, and suggest that the Saudis and Syrians now have a clearer picture of one another's expectations. While the Saudi King has agreed in principle to visit Damascus, it is still unclear how quickly this will come about or if Lebanese government formation is a prerequisite, though travel by a Saudi delegation to Beirut Sep 30 suggests this may be the case. Contacts suggest the King will travel with the newly-appointed Syrian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Mahdi Dakhilallah within "the next few weeks." END SUMMARY.

UNEXPECTED VISIT RAISES EXPECTATIONS

[1](#)2. (U) Asad's last-minute decision to attend the September 23 KAUST opening came as a surprise to almost everyone involved. Press reports characterized the move as a clear sign of continued Saudi-Syrian rapprochement and focused heavily on its potential impact on the government formation process in Lebanon. The official Saudi Press Agency announced that the two leaders had discussed "major regional and international developments," without further specifics. The Syrian Arab News Agency downplayed the meeting's emphasis on Lebanon, noting that "the relationship between Damascus and Riyadh does not go through Beirut, and Syria and Saudi Arabia agree that Lebanon's affairs must be managed by the Lebanese."

ABDULLAH AND ASAD DISCUSS WHAT COMES NEXT

[1](#)3. (C) According to contacts at the Egyptian embassy, the media accurately reported details regarding the size and nature of the meeting. King Abdullah, his son Prince Abdulaziz, and Asad were the only individuals present, and discussion of Lebanon and Palestinian reconciliation dominated the agenda. The sides outlined specific, concrete expectations they had for one another. With respect to

Lebanese government formation, King Abdullah asked Asad to use his influence over his Syrian allies, and encourage Free Patriotic Movement Leader Michel Aoun to abandon his insistence on the Ministry of Transport and Communication portfolio for Gebran Bassil. The King also urged Asad to push harder on Hamas to reach an agreement on Palestinian reconciliation in Cairo. For his part, Asad asked the King to visit Damascus. The King reportedly agreed to the visit; however, he did not indicate whether this visit was contingent upon Lebanese government formation. Asad reportedly promised the King a response to his requests, which was delivered to Culture Minister Khoja via Syrian information minister Mohsen Bilal on September 27. (NOTE: The Saudi Press Agency reported that Bilal had delivered an unspecified "invitation." END NOTE.) While the timing of any visit is still unclear, the Egyptians expect it will happen "within the next few weeks," and that he will travel with newly-appointed Syrian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, former Information Minister Mahdi Dakhlallah. The Saudis reportedly agreed to Dakhlallah's appointment on September 26; he is expected to present his credentials at the earliest opportunity.

14. (C) Meanwhile, notwithstanding protests from both sides regarding the Lebanese angle, a Saudi delegation headed by Mecca Governor Khalid Al Faisal travelled to Beirut for meetings with Lebanese parliamentarians; unusually, the delegation included Minister of State Abdulaziz bin Fahd, who met with Sa'ad Hariri and President Michel Sleiman to convey a message from King Abdullah. See ref A for details.

TURKISH CHARGE: WE MADE IT HAPPEN

15. (C) Turkish Charge Sadik Arslan told Poloff on September

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28 that reports of intense Turkish lobbying to convince a reluctant Asad were true, and that the Turks had undertaken these efforts by their own initiative. He also indicated that Jordanian King Abdullah may have played a role, though he did not mention any specifics. "It was during Eid, so Asad was reluctant to come (to KAUST)," Arslan said, "but we believed it was important and the Saudi-Syrian relationship is essential." Without a Saudi-Syrian agreement, he continued, there was little hope that Lebanon could overcome its government formation crisis. As for the rumored visit of King Abdullah to Damascus, Arslan said, "we are hopeful that this will happen very soon." When pressed as to whether this visit could be expected in days, weeks, or months, he declined to speculate, adding only that he felt the current atmosphere was "positive."

COMMENT: BACK ON TRACK?

16. (C) Asad's visit to the Kingdom is the latest in a series of steps towards a fuller Saudi-Syrian rapprochement. Whether the meeting will lead to the King visiting Damascus-- and whether this visit will become before, or after Lebanese government formation-- is still unclear. Saudi Ambassador Abdullah Al-Eifan's arrival in Damascus on August 25 was confirmation that the Saudi-Syrian relationship was ready to enter a new phase. However, Khoja's remark to former Charge d'Affaires a.i. Ambassador Erdman that the Saudis were "not talking to the Syrians about Lebanon" (ref a) on September 1 suggested Lebanon was becoming an irritant to the process. Asad's visit, and the naming of a new Syrian Ambassador soon afterwards, indicates the relationship may be back on a more positive track.

SMITH